California Seasonal Fire Weather/ Fire Danger Outlook

April 2006

California Executive Summary

This preliminary outlook is a product of the National Seasonal Assessment Workshop held April 4 -7, 2006 in Boulder, Colorado. The interagency workshop brought together experts in the field of climatology, meteorology, fuels, and fire danger.

The objective of this workshop was to assess all factors that will affect wildland fire potential during the 2006 wildland fire season. The outlook is based on past developments, current conditions, trends, and predictions for the next six months (April through September).

The objectives of the California Executive Summary are to:

- Summarize winter and early spring weather and fuel conditions to date.
- Provide a first-look prognosis of the 2006 wildland fire potential in California, based on available fire weather and fuel predictions.
- Highlight any areas of concern related to fuel conditions across the state.
- Highlight management implications and concerns.
- Provide the framework for the more comprehensive outlook in late June.

This summary was generated prior to the significant weather months of April and May. Therefore, while it should aid California wildland fire managers in 2006 fire season preparedness, and add early insight, it is not the final word. A more comprehensive California Seasonal Fire Weather/ Fire Danger Outlook will be published in separate North Ops and South Ops documents, which will come by the end of May in South Ops and by late June in North Ops. These documents will give increased detail regarding all aspects of the coming fire season. They will also provide any necessary updates to the July through October climate forecasts used at the writing of this executive summary. In addition to this outlook, the GACC Predictive Service Units (PSU) issue detailed monthly assessments of fire weather and fire danger.

Recent and Predicted Weather

A La Nina pattern (cooler than normal tropical eastern Pacific) which developed rapidly this past winter and peaked near moderate strength in February, resulted in varying precipitation amounts across the state. In North Ops, precipitation through February ranged from 70% of normal in the south, to 140% of normal in the wettest areas in the north. By March, a shift to a very wet and cool pattern occurred and brought near record breaking snowfall across the higher elevations for the month. Currently, North Ops has received 120 to 200% of normal precipitation for the season, with the mid to high-elevation snowpack much above average.

The bulk of the cool season has been much drier in southern California, with precipitation amounts varying generally between 50% of normal in the south to a little more than 120% of normal across the central portions of the state. Recent rains over the last four to six weeks have alleviated some of the drier conditions across southern portions of California.

Above normal rainfall and below normal temperatures will continue across much of California through at least late April. A transition to a warmer and drier pattern, relative to normal, is anticipated to occur sometime in May. Near normal temperatures and precipitation are then expected statewide for the latter half of May and into June, with the possibility of North Ops rising to a few degrees above normal. For the summer period, we can expect a continuation of near normal temperatures in the coastal areas, but the interior portions of the state will likely experience near to slightly above normal temperatures. For this period, precipitation is forecast to be at or a little below normal, but it should be noted that average rainfall during the summer for much of the state is insignificant. The confidence factor in these weather forecasts is about average.

Fuels Discussion

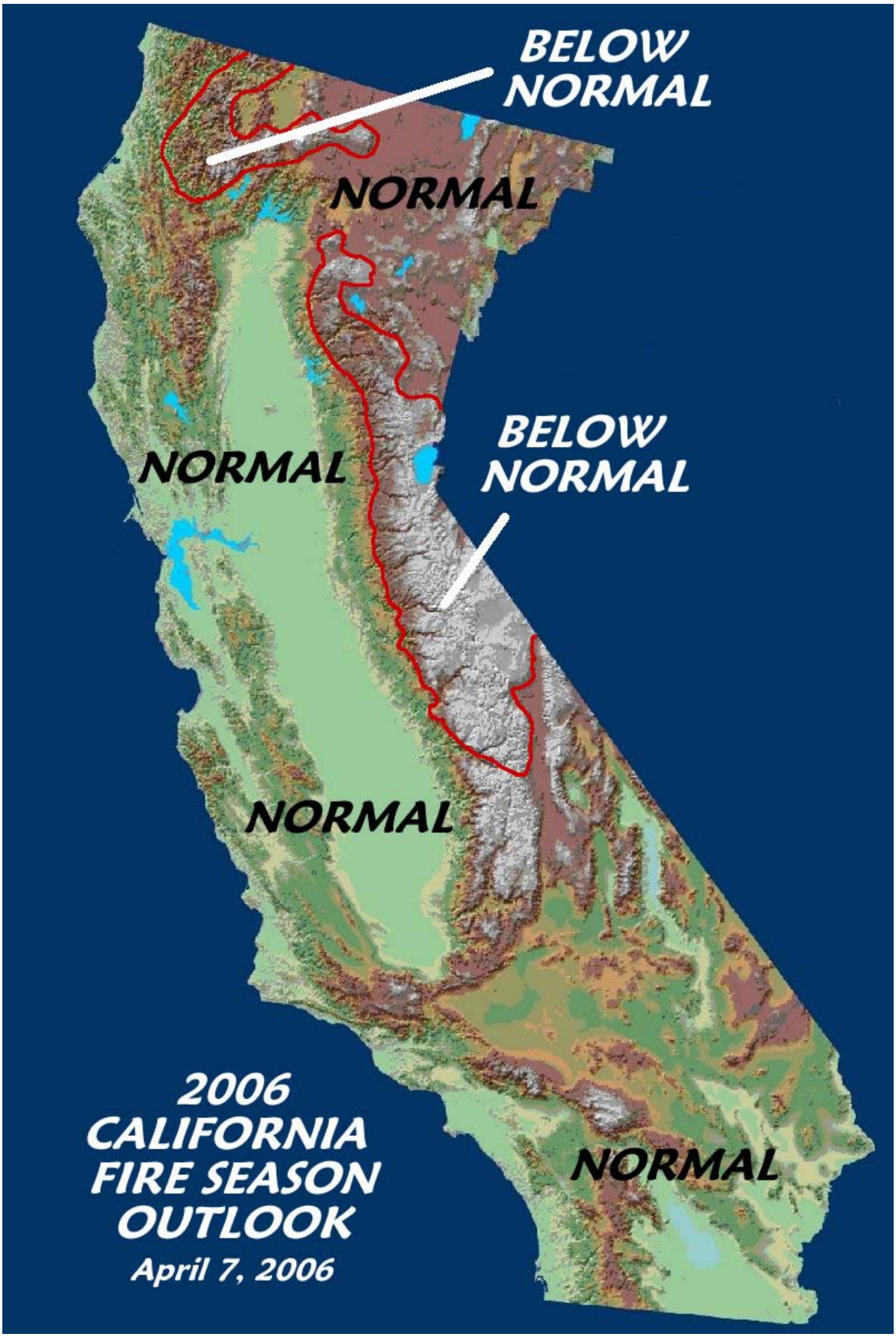
Dead fuels are currently either snow-covered or have moisture contents near to above normal, especially in the northern two-thirds of the state. A continuing area of concern is the large amount of bug-killed timber on the national forests from about the Sequoia NF southward. The arrangement of these fuels is changing from aerial to surface, as dead trees continue to fall. Snowpacks and continued wet weather will delay greenup dates for live fuels, particularly at mid and upper elevations. One effect will be that live fuel moistures will remain at high levels longer into the fire season than normal.

Fire Season Outlook

With the recent increase in late season precipitation and delayed greenup, the onset of this year's fire season will generally be later than normal in North Ops and may be later than normal in portions of South Ops. The current and expected weather and fuel conditions will lead to below normal fire potential over the central and northern Sierras, and in portions of northwest California well into fire season. Near normal fire potential is expected elsewhere across the state.

Management Implications

- With the anticipated later start to the fire season, there should not be a need to bring on resources any earlier than normal.
- California resources will likely be available for out-of-state incidents during the early part of fire season.
- Prescribed burn windows in northern California maybe of normal or longer length, but would start and end later than usual. However, a delayed window will be impacted by potential resource drain to incidents in other regions.
- Funding level reductions could result in diminished initial attack resource capability, thus increasing burned acres to above average levels.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2006
CALIFORNIA
FIRE SEASON
OUTLOOK
April 7, 2006

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